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The Effects of Divorce on Children’s Academic Success

Divorce can be a traumatic experience for any child who has to watch what they once called a family, diffuse into two separate households, and make the decision, if of age, which parent they want to live with. Society realizes the emotional, mental, and physical stress that divorce can put onto a child, but what about the academic stress? If a father once helped the child with their math homework and now he lives out of reach, will the child’s academic standing fall? Some teachers rarely look into a child’s personal life and help them through problems such as divorce. A child cannot simply separate home and work like a mature adult should be able to do, but they instead reflect their attitudes of home in their entire lives. Also, most children are taught that what happens inside the home stays there. Although some people may ignore the evidence that divorce affects children’s academics, it has been proven that the absence of one parent affects the child’s well-being in school, the economic loss from a divorce affects the child, and the resulting shift in homes and new schools affects the child. Schools in America, where the divorce rate is now fifty-one percent need to track down children of divorce and provide programs that will help stabilize their academic scores, because as this research shows, divorce will cause a decrease in a child’s grades, behavior, and so much more.

Children are usually apart of most divorces, and it can affect them in many ways, especially with their academic grades. More than half of marriages fail in American society, and a good number of those divorces involve a custody battle, and parental rights, as well as an emotional tug on the children’s hearts and minds. The effects of the separation can be reflected in their decline of academic success. Yet, others choose to ignore the effect on grades and attribute it to the child not focusing, or just not caring about how they do in school. There are not many programs in the schools of America to help children of divorce cope with the separation and support their advancement in school. Thankfully, many researchers have brought to the attention of society the effects of separation on a child’s well-being in school.

The point made that the absence of one parent affects the child’s academic grades is proven by Sik Hyun Kim’s studies of the effects of divorce on cognitive and noncongitive skills of children before, during and after the divorce. Through her tests she discovers that children of divorce score lower than children of intact families in the initial test of cognitive skills, and that this gap increases over time. Kim also found a difference in math scores rose from .3 in kindergarten to 3.3 in the fifth grade (par. 38). The children of intact families scored higher on reading tests as well as mathematics, than children of divorce and continue to throughout their lives. There is no direct increase or decrease in noncongnitive traits, but it proves that academic skills do degenerate after a divorce (Kim, par. 39). Kim suggests that parents address how well their children are doing in school and what their behavior is like before going through with separating (par. 53).

Another researcher, Claudia Buchmann, focuses her research on how family background affects a woman’s chances at completing college and her academic performance throughout life versus men’s college completion rates and grades (par 10). She points out that children with single parents tend to push their sons more toward college than their daughters, while girls with married parents are given a greater opportunity to make it to a college level education (par 9). Buchmann also shows that women complete college based on how far their parents make it in the educational system (par 31). If the parents don’t complete high school or college the daughter is unlikely to earn a college degree. These two researchers focus on how the loss or absence of a parents directly effects the child’s academic success, and the research proves that children of divorce, due to absence of a parent, has lower academic scores.

Buchmann also brings up a second point that the absence of one parent inevitably results in the decline of financial support for a child, saying that the child will not have enough financial support to get through college (par 33). The most optimal financial support comes from having both parents forming one solid income versus having only one parent attempting to provide money for college for their child.

Dorit Eldar-Avidan, Muhammad Haj-Yahia, and Charles W. Greenbaum’s research link directly to the Buchmann’s second point that the decline of economic support in a single parent home negatively affects children’s grades. They state that children of divorce almost always have lower grades and fewer educational opportunities due to lack of funding from the non-custodial parent (Eldar, par. 5). It doesn’t just take money to stay in college, but the smarts to keep on top of academics, which children of divorce according to this study have neither. Due to the drastic loss of income, most children of divorce will take on a minimum wage job to help support their home (par 19). A job adds stress, consumes study time, and adds more responsibility to a child which can have a major impact on the child’s academic standing since they must now juggle grades and a work schedule. Even if the parent that has custody remarries, children will continue to work and not include the new spouse in the financial burden (par 27). Remarrying can also affect how a child does, but children who are put back into intact families are not discussed in this research. Children who are on free or reduced lunch at a middle or high school may have just experienced a divorce and need assistance from teachers and counselors. Schools should allow jobs for students to work, as most schools are understaffed and children want to earn money for their homes.

In William Jeynes article, “Examining the Effects of Parental Absence on the Academic Achievement of Adolescents: The Challenge of Controlling for Family Income” he calls upon past research to establish that is has been long thought by many researchers that there exists a link between family structure and academic achievement (par 4). This link is without a doubt negative for the children of divorce’s grades. Again, the point surfaces that children do unwell academically because they come from poor families (Jeynes, par 3). The research also shows that low-income families are more likely to divorce than middle or high- income families (Jeynes, par 4). He uses two school of thought on why children of divorce do poor academically, family income, and parental absence. While one bases the thought that the poorer the family, the less well the child will do in school, the other blames the academic decline of the child on the absence of one of the parents. Parental absence theorists do acknowledge that the absence of a parent means lower family income, but they say that the absence of the mother or father affects the child emotionally. These authors’ research directly links the loss of income to the decline in academic success of a child.

The third arguing point that as children move into one parent’s home they might have to change schools, is disputed by people saying that the children are by now used to change. There is no evidence that a child gets used to change at any point in their life and now they must establish new friends in a new environment. Eldar states that this move will not help the child further their education, especially in the emotionally unstable time they are currently going through (par 6).

Rebecca Blank explains the same type of situation in her article, “Absent Fathers: Why Don’t We Ever Talk about the Unmarried Men?” Blank establishes that although many awards are given out for absent fathers to pay child support, very few will make the full payment and at regular intervals (442). These irregular payments cause an unstable environment for the child as they may have to move constantly to a more affordable living space and thus change schools, and learning environments. Again, the child may feel the need to step up as a bread winner in the home and add stress to their lives. She also points out that lack of financial support does not mean that the father is not involved with his children, but this may create extra moving problems for the child (443). Blank brings up that schools can provide counselors for children to talk to perhaps in place of a father figure (443).

When all three of the points are combined it shows that divorce not only affects the child’s academic success at the time of divorce, but also can lead to academic decline over time. Wendy Sigle-Rushton, John Hobcraft, and Kathleen Kiernan bring this to the table as their main point in their article, “Parental Divorce and Subsequent Disadvantage: A Cross-Cohort Comparison”. The authors state that divorce has overridden death as the main cause of family disruption (Sigle, par 2). The data the authors collect shows that children of divorce do worse on academic test at ages ten and eleven than children with married parents (Sigle, par 33). Sigle also points out that as adults children of divorce have problems with academic and vocational qualifications (par 35). This lack of skills can be directly attributed to the loss of academic success they had from the separation of their parents. Speech classes as well as tutoring in schools could help divert the decline of academic success throughout the life of children of divorce.

It is understood that not all children will be geniuses at academics, but how does divorce affect a child’s well-being in school? Researchers have found numerous ways as to how the children of divorce suffer in academic standings because of drastic income loss, favoring of a child, and absence of a father, as well as many other reasons. While there are still those who believe that a child just doesn’t care about academic grades, teachers need to take notice of what is going on in a child’s personal life and how that reflects their grades. America as a whole can treat children going through a divorce with the care and attention they need to keep their academic standings high and make a way to their goals and future careers. It doesn’t matter what age the child may be, they are still affected by divorce.

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